Ethics of Early Talent and Identity Formation with Music

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This is slightly edited, informal email dialogue that took place between August 1999 and March 2000 among Lee Bartel, (the moderator) University of Toronto, Joyce Bellous, McMaster University, Wayne Bowman, Brandon University, and Ken Peglar, Peel Regional School Board.

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"I'm never going to go through anything like that again. If you want to be with Hilary you will have to play as well as Hilary. If you want to be together you've got to be as good as each other." Hilary and Jackie’s Mother

"It's just the cello, and it's silly really. I just don't want to be a cellist after all. Well, I never asked to be a cellist, you see. It's all just a big cock-up. One day I was just playing and then the next day I was all booked for the next two years. I hate the cello if you want to know." Jackie in Moscow

"If you think that being an ordinary person is any easier than being an extra-ordinary one you're wrong. If you didn't have that cello to prop you up you'd be nothing." Hilary to Jackie

Jackie: Danny, would you still love me if I couldn't play?
Daniel: What?
Jackie: I said, would you still love me if I couldn't play?
Daniel: You wouldn't be you if you couldn't play.
Jackie: No, I want to know.
Daniel: Our bodies sway to music
    Oh, brightening glance
    How can we know
    The dancer from the dance?
Jackie: But don't you wish sometimes you couldn't play, that you could just be ordinary?
Daniel: What? Live in the country, making bread, feeding chickens, playing once a year with a bunch of amateurs?
Jackie: How dare you insult my sister!
Daniel: I wasn't insulting her, I was . . .
Jackie: Well at least she chose her life. Not like you and me, we're just trained freaks!

Quotes from the Movie: Hilary and Jackie

Lee Bartel: John Dewey talks about “an experience” in education as living on in all future experiences. That seems to work both positively and negatively. If a child comes to understand that s/he is “talented,” how does that affect future learning and identity in the “talented” area? What happens if the child has been labeled “talented” but then “fails” at the area? Or what happens to the child who is made to believe that s/he is “untalented” and then disengages from learning challenges in music? Some children engage in music learning because conditions are right, develop considerable ability, start to see themselves as “musicians” (which is different from seeing themselves as musical), and then begin to realize that the cost of being a musician in today’s competitive, perfection-oriented world is very high, and the psychological cost of “quitting and failing” is just as high. For those who persist, music is a field that is always reaching for greater virtuosity, greater perfection of delivery, greater perfection of expressivity, and conducted in a cultural context that expects and practices critical judgement as the first response from any peer or audience. In that context, to set a child on the course of becoming a “musician” is in fact setting a child on a course of psychological suffering because of constant fear of failure or the judgement of insufficiency.

If all children have potential to be musical, experiences which lead the child to conclude s/he is not musical, and thus thwart or inhibit learning, actually rob the child. In the book Systemic Violence in Education, Epp and Watkinson (1997) state that they view as “violent” any practices and procedures that adversely impact individuals by “burdening them psychologically, mentally, culturally, spiritually, economically, or physically. It includes practices and procedures that prevent students from learning, thus harming them.” Are our music education practices violent?

Before we discuss the ethical issues, we need to look specifically at “talent” and at “identity.” How do you define these concepts? What is their relationship? How do you see talent and identity functioning within the music or arts education of children?

Joyce Bellous: Identity is one of those hard words to define. Some words, like dog or cat, can be defined by statements such as a cat is an animal that meows and a dog is an animal that barks. Identity is loose and slippery. I want to say something like: identity is what names me and what I name myself is who I am. Identity is something that is both given and developed. I am given elements of my identity at birth, e.g., nationality, sex,
parents, siblings etc. Intelligence and talent seem to be both given and developed. I am
given a certain intelligence and I also must develop it. So the first comment I want to
make in distinguishing identity and talent is that identity is greater than talent. That is,
talent should always be held as one aspect of my identity and not the whole of it. The
more that my talent comes to dominate my identity the less safety there is in other things
that I do reasonably well as well as in my relationships.

The identity problem is thoroughly modern. In pre-modern times I think talent would
have entirely defined someone, if that person could get access to the resources to develop
his or her (perhaps) talent. Place, role, etc in society entirely defined the individual. Now
we want an authentic life and since life is conceived as more than what one does alone,
we want a space to open up for identity that is greater than talent alone can define.

Ken Peglar: To take Joyce's point, yes we're given intelligence and talent when we are
born and we do what we can with them. In pre-modern times our identity had much less
to do with ourselves than it did our social station. And talent was usually the only way to
significantly advance that. My identity consists of what I look like, including how I
dress, my predicable or accustomed behaviour, and what I know. Part of what I know,
and not separate from it, is what I can do - it is part of my intellectual capital. In my
experience, doing is very important to kids. A big chunk of an arts teachers' credibility
rests on how well they can play or draw. This is a significant part of their identity as a
teacher.

Then there's the notion of public and private identity - the “me” as object and the interior,
subjective “me.” The relationship between those two selves is interesting and sometimes
problematic.

Talent - the ability to do something at a high level of accomplishment with no apparent
increased effort. A high level compared to whom? A baggage-heavy term in schools with
good arts programs who are competing with so-called arts high schools. And what is
talent without motivation?

As to the relationship between talent and identity, that's hard to pin down. I've had
dynamic, expressive, productive leaders in music and art class, who were inarticulate
ciphers in their other subjects as well as students who were talented but not interested in
developing it. It clearly was not something that was important to their identity. Perhaps
they were reacting adversely to any perceived notion that they were being homogenized
by the art-making activities.

Ken Peglar: Identity is a combination of what I know and what I can do. They are not
the same. What I know is my intellectual capital. Whether or not I choose to share any of
it with others is another matter. But on those occasions when I choose to share it -
clarifying a point during a conversation, answering a question or making a connection in
class - it becomes a part of my public identity. The extent to which it is useful, in the
sense that it is valued by others, determines my public identity. This holds in the negative as well. If I'm a clown or mute in class, those behaviours also signify my public. My experience with high school students is that demonstrable skills seem to have more caché than intellectual skills. High marks are the result of studying. Admirable, for sure, but the person didn't know the information in the first place. It's new and must be assimilated. With performance skill, it is as if the person knew how to play or draw really well all along and the practicing they do is just the maintenance of that skill, just keeping the expert wheel greased, so to speak. The notion of practice for a music student is a given. Even non-musicians know that musicians practice. But the notion of practicing drawing skills is quite a novelty to beginning art students. You don't practice it, you just do it! My best art students keep a sketch book and supplies in their backpacks all the time.

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**Lee Bartel:** Both Ken and Joyce seem to giving a bit more place to identity than talent. Also, both are accepting that "talent" is in fact a workable concept? Ken says, "talent is the ability to do something at a high level of accomplishment ..." I guess this is the achievement/aptitude issue but if "talent" is accomplishment and accomplishment depends on motivation and work, then what is left for talent? The concept may be clearer if we look at what talent is not? Who is not talented? And what are our teachers and schools and funding agencies justified in doing with those not talented? In the arts, is talent the principal Darwinian determinant? The talented are the fittest? Could you please unpack the concept of talent in our society a bit more? Then might it be clearer how it functions within identity?

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**Wayne Bowman:** Seems to me that any time we buy into something like "talent" we create in the same breath a very large pool of people who are "other" to that class or category. And indeed, given secondary music education's propensity for catering to the talented while entertaining or ignoring the rest, how we conceptualize talent is a significant issue with far-reaching moral implications. I guess I see "talent" as a dimension of identity that gets inculcated and nurtured by music education. It's an honorific term, of course, and one that gets applied to people who do particularly well what "we" do. But who is that "we" and what are we doing, exactly, when we sort kids into categories labeled 'talented' and 'other'?

Maybe one way to get a handle on this talent business is to examine its manifestation in more purely intellectual domains: intelligence. We have learned over the years that intelligence is not singular, but multiple; that it is culturally relative; that people have different "cognitive styles" which are important mediating factors; and that it is misleading to regard it as an absolute capacity, since it can be improved with training. So the notion of intelligence has been de-centred, its stability and absoluteness challenged, its borders softened. Intelligence isn't something one either has or doesn't have, but a general name for a host of aptitudes and propensities that can manifest themselves in a variety of ways.
It seems to me that "musical talent" would benefit from similar de-centering. I agree with Joyce that we need to regard talent as but one aspect of identity. But we could and arguably should go further: to recognize the multidimensionality of musical talent. We're too quick to equate it with technical proficiency, or facility, or virtuosity. But talent is situated, and very much relative to certain traditions, practices, ways of being musical. A talented classical musician is often not a talented jazz musician and vice versa. And a talented performer may be a pathetic composer -- indeed, some of the habits and dispositions that make a great performer may get in the way of the creative dispositions so essential to composition. When we speak of musical talent, we often seem to impute to it a sort of wholeness or unity it just doesn't have. So Ken's question "compared to whom" is an interesting one that can be approached on quite a number of levels, and from a number of perspectives. "Talent," it seems to me, would be much less troublesome if it weren't an "it" -- a singular, unified thing -- and if we recognized it could take many forms, manifest itself in many ways.

Likewise for identity, actually. Identity is who I am, as Joyce says. But who I am is always multiple, always in a state of flux, and always relative to a host of things, tendencies, and attributes I am not. Put differently, identity functions reflexively or dialectically with alterity. Some aspects of my identity are pretty much given, but many involve constructs over which I have considerable power and influence. I can agree with Joyce, then, that identity is what names me; but I would hasten to point out that not all of "what names me" names me necessarily. I can choose, for instance, whether what names me is or is not "feminist". Moreover, "what names me" is always profoundly plural, malleable, fluid. And this has direct and I think profound relevance to music and music education, because I submit that music involves the ritual enactment of many different identities, the exploration of various, diverse, and contradictory modes of subjectivity. That being the case, I'm unable (or at least unwilling) to draw a distinction between "music" and the people who make it. And the significance of that is that it makes of music a fundamentally moral enterprise or undertaking. Questions of musical worth, then, cannot be separated from sociocultural questions. The social does not relate to the musical as context to content. People's identities, both individual and collective, are inextricably linked to music, indeed are part of it. "Musical" is, in part, who I am: but musical in certain ways, ways that align me with some musical others at the same time they differentiate me sharply from still others. In this way, musical identity is always social identity.

That said, I think we can -- and probably should -- do more to help students see how music (their musical doings) works to define and shape who they are. At least in part because that would enable resistance, control, and empowerment. How one deals with one's success and failures depends upon whether one attributes them to internal or externals causes, to things over which one has control or does not have control, or whether one's successes or failures reflect on some stable, inalterable attribute like talent or not. An adjudicator's cutting remark can destroy a kid if it is presumed to have absolute validity. But if I can learn to regard such remarks as indications of personal bias or shortsightedness that's another thing. I know as a parent of kids who are now
professional musicians I've had to do a fair bit of that over the years: discrediting the adjudicator or juror, that is, urging children to see failures as a function of (bad) luck, and successes as the result of effort (plus musical talent?).

Ken's comment about talented students for whom that talent does not define or enter into their identity in important ways intrigues me. It seems to me that most music educators would be inclined to regard this scenario as an undesirable one to be somehow rectified: the trick being to make talent matter, to get kids to invest more extensively in their 'talented' identity. But a bit of psychological distance seems to me a fairly healthy thing. For one thing, setbacks or failures may be less destructive; and for another, music and musicians are not held in particularly high esteem in our society (hence, a decision to assume a 'musician' identity should not be taken lightly or without consideration of a full range of consequences, many of them potentially adverse). Maybe one of the things that distinguishes musical education from indoctrination is freedom of choice informed by awareness the potential consequences of such choices. And perhaps music educators need to acknowledge things like (1) apparent or even conspicuous musical 'talent' do not necessarily mean one should invest heavily in music; (2) the possession of talent is but one reason one might wish to invest in musical activity; and (3) the decision of which among the multiple talents possessed by most people should be cultivated must be based on more than the mere existence of talent.

Lee asks whether 'talent' is the principal Darwinian determinant. I guess it's clear I think it's not. Such things as motivation, persistence, resilience, tenacity and so on matter too. And to tell the truth, I think a lot of successful professional musicians have more of these latter qualities than they do 'talent'. Or does talent really arise from and consist in such characteristics as these? Is there, in other words, such a thing as 'talent' that is altogether lacking in these attributes?

A parenthetical query: What do you think about Suzuki's notion of educating or developing talent? The idea that just as everyone develops proficiency in a mother tongue, everyone can develop musicality (musical talent?) given the proper conditions and nurturing?

I'm really intrigued by Lee's observations about the psychological costs of failing and music education -- that becoming a musician is fraught with potential for psychological suffering. I've long argued that we are wrong to regard musical education as an unconditional good (as much of our advocacy tends to imply). If one imputes to music power for positive ends, it seems to me that one has, in the same moment, granted it power for negative ends -- made of it a moral, and not just an innocuous, "aesthetic" undertaking. I like the way this brings people back into music education -- students, and teachers -- and treats music education as an enterprise devoted to the development or cultivation of "character."

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Joyce Bellous: We can talk about all people as having a talent for something (an egalitarian approach) and we just have to find it, or we can talk about talent as an honorific term (as you mentioned Wayne) that distinguishes some (always a few so it remains precious) from others (the untalented). And you are right, that second sense creates others who are less than talented with reference to some valued activity, such as playing the violin. When we began the topic however I thought we were concerned also with the way that being talented tends to take over one's entire identity and leaves nothing left of life, i.e., every energy is focused on the talented side of the individual. And I do like the notion that we are all geodesic (I can't spell the word, sorry) domes. We are all complex, multi-sided entities that no one else can entirely take in, because everyone is situated somewhere with respect to us and can't see our back sides, so to speak.

One problem with talent in terms of identity is the lop-sided consequence, let us say. Talent, in the specific precious sense can dominate identity. I think that the lop-sided problem is very hard on children in particular, under certain conditions, but it is not without some benefits. During adolescence being very good at something that is valued provides a solid identity bridge to adulthood, provides focus, gives one something interesting to do and to work at improving. Being talented is a good use of time. However, if one is very good at something that has little or no value in the social world one wants to have currency in, that is not so good. So if parents are pressing a child to excel and the identity cost to the child in the peer social world is too high the child suffers or rebels.

Again this is complex because if the parental world is valued by the child for its emotional support I think the peer world is less significant or perhaps the peer world is easier to negotiate with that family support in place. So in general, whenever we have talent, if identity is to flourish, I think we need to support a child in a holistic way. High expectations plus high support equal a healthy identity--all round. High expectations with low support is a disaster for identity--and intensifies imbalance. High expectations along with high (holistic) support deals with the lop-sided problem reasonably well, I think.

What I like to consider is that I am at least partly the story I tell myself about myself. Change and fluidity, to the extent they are possible, come about by being consciously aware of the narrative I tell my self about me. I can change that story, details maybe, but maybe more than details. I can say, You know, life is more than work. I need to play. I want to play, dance, sing some of the time...and actually do those things. (what do musicians do when they want to play?)

So when you say that musical identity is always social identity, I think you are saying the music itself is social, connected to others, not done alone, so in that sense musical identity is social and often performed with others. Is that what you were meaning to say? As a non-musician I want to put forward one way that I hear you make this point. Music is done with others (historical, international, and present others). Perhaps, musical talent involves me in a way that the mental talent of a philosopher of education does not. Is performing with others a special experience of identity? Asks the non-musician.
Also, musical talent introduces suffering of particular kinds into our lives, that's where you end Wayne. But is suffering not productive of other aspects of identity, e.g., character, that we prize?

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Wayne Bowman: Let me follow up on your final sentence, in which "character" is an "aspect of identity"? I note, for instance, that one of my dictionaries defines character as "the combination of emotional, intellectual, and moral qualities distinguishing one person or group from another." Sounds a lot like "identity".

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Wayne Bowman: I want to respond to Joyce’s comment: “We can talk about all people as having a talent for something (an egalitarian approach).” Are 'talents' things people just have, or do we create talent -- with our linguistic labels, our instructional actions, our curricular settings? I know, I know: the old nature/nurture issue. But I want to resist speaking of this thing as if it were singular, unified, durable, innate. As I think has been said elsewhere here, talent and identity are 'situated', context-specific. Is part of "talent" just that it means something comes easy? If so, then the nature of that "something" is an important consideration, as are the contextual variables that frame the 'doing' in question. Labels like 'talent' can and do function reductively, and they tend to reify as well: I'm interested in questioning the idea that it names something substantive, interested in observing that labels like this create what they name in certain respects. A kind of nominalism I suppose. The upshot of this may be simply that as teachers a lot of what we do is try to make others more proficient at doings of certain kinds, at the same time persuading them to regard themselves as being "good at" such doings. Is this talent education? When we tell kids, whether with words or actions, that they are talented, are we urging them to attribute their "being good at" to internal, stable causes? Are we suggesting that they modify their identity (what they call themselves, what narratives they create for themselves) to include 'talent'? What kinds of moral concerns attend acts like these?

Further Joyce says, “I do like the notion that we are all geodesic domes. We are all complex, multi-sided entities that no one else can entirely take in, because everyone is situated somewhere with respect to us and can't see our back sides, so to speak.” Geodesic domes are different kinds of entities than identities, right? To be sure, all metaphors have their limits. But one of the limitations of this one is its tendency to impart to identity a concreteness or factuality I'm not sure it has (a return to one of the points I guess I was trying to make above?). I won't belabour the issue, because I'm not sure of its significance for our ultimate purposes here. Are identities more like geodesic domes or more like Gestalten: configurations whose meanings are in part a function of perspective -- and which, like the duck-rabbit figure, depend on which features one takes as salient?

I react to the statement, “identity is a very modern notion.” Just to help give an idea where I come from, references to "modern" send up flags for me; because for many, we
are now in a decidedly postmodern era. That renders the meaning of modern problematic. Identity is a recent notion -- does that say the same thing? I'd be inclined to say that identity as a centred, stable construct is modern, whereas identity as socially constituted through alterity is postmodern.

Joyce says, “I am named by the roles I play and the names for those roles are there in advance of my filling them.” I don't know about this one. Do roles really function this deterministically? Or do we, in performing roles, decide how we will fill them. I wonder if the idea of the idea of "the performative" from speech act theory might be useful here -- a "performative" as a doing that constitutes a being. Seems to me that there is a reflexive, dialectical relationship between roles and identity.

“Is performing with others a special experience of identity? Asks the non-musician.” Yes! And I'd argue that this is one of the things that powerfully differentiates music from the other arts. And this in turn makes musical endeavors moral and political -- rather than merely "aesthetic". I've tried to stress in some of my writing how this necessitates examination of how musical experience defines and structures collective and individual identity. Eleanor Stubley writes compellingly about these issues.

Joyce stated: “Also, musical talent introduces suffering of particular kinds into our lives, that's where you end Wayne. But is suffering not productive of other aspects of identity, eg character, that we prize?” Well, yes, I suppose. That "music builds character" is a claim with ancient lineage. I suppose what might concern us here is whether this is invariably the case. Can music be destructive of "character"? Under what circumstances? I think I'm just anxious to remind people that most of our inspiring claims for musical experience are contingent. You're right, of course, to remind of the potentially positive side of the struggle to push talent to its limits. In fact, the polysemy of music makes it particularly well-suited to this, one might say: music is the kind of endeavor one never fully masters; musicianship is always a work in progress, and its tasks and rewards are always changing. This leads, at least potentially, to an awareness/ acceptance/appreciation of/ respect for the true complexity/richness of reality -- in contrast, I suppose, to the reductive nature of language and reason.

Joyce Bellous: I want to approach your comments as an educator. I think Plato is right. Our first approach is to observe each child to see what is there. In Plato's case, he was insistent that we not use the social markers of privilege to decide in advance of observing the child whether this particular child would be talented in a particular way, e.g., as a guardian (etc). But I agree with him that we are looking for the talent in each child. Now what does it mean to find that one child is talented in x and another is not? Or to put the question another way, if we observe each child well, will we not find that each child is talented in some way? For my self, I believe that if we regard each child attentively, we will find talent in something (I am an egalitarian). I think to put the question in the second way picks up the point made earlier in our discussion that intelligence itself is multi-faceted (e.g., multiple intelligence theory). So like Plato's world, maybe we are simply using social markers of privilege to decide that a particular child is talented and
then we reify that identity as a talented one and disallow the child's identity to shift and grow in ways that do not conform to the talented identity label.

The second educational concern I have has to do with a Piagetian notion of the educational relationship between the teacher and learner versus Vygotsky's idea. For Piaget, what I do is what I do by myself, on my own. That is, my talent is already there, it is mine and the teacher allows it to become obvious in some way. For Vygotsky, there is a zone of proximal development in which what I know is what I learn with another who knows more than I do. That is, I learn along with someone who knows already and who draws out and enhances and shapes what I know. So Piaget's model has influenced most of modern schooling and Vygotsky's model is more like an apprenticeship learning approach. Talent is different I think in each of these models. I am not sure which one is most like the way students learn who are musically talented. Piagetian approaches are highly individualistic and Vygotsky is more communally based. So depending on the model for the teacher learner relation, talent is both something we have (something I observe in the child a la Plato) and also something which we develop according to Vygotsky. I think that the Piagetian model is not very useful re the musically talented because I am assuming that apprenticeship more closely resembles the teaching relation, but I may be wrong about that.

Identity will form regardless of what teachers do, as with character. The point is what are the boundaries around the individual 'talent' and the teaching learning relationship. Can everyone be good at something? Is being good at something an important part of everyone's identity. If the answer to the second question is yes, then the teacher's attempt to help a student to be good musically contributes to the enhancement of that child's identity. The question also raises the problem of the teacher's identity and character, and the nature of the ongoing relationship between them.

So we haven't really discussed how a teacher might tell if he or she is overstepping the appropriate boundaries around the identity and talent of the child for reasons that have more to do with the teacher's identity, talent and character.

Whenever I use the term modern I likely mean it in a pejorative sense. Or at least I mean that it's dated in precisely the way you suggest. So pre-modern identity was not even an issue, one's identity -- one's social location in a hierarchically structured world that was already there for the individual at birth. The modern (dated) notion of identity emerges as a consequence of the breakdown of feudal society and the build-up of authentically (artistically) constituted lives. What is identity now is a good question. But I think we are dealing with Rousseau's fundamental question: how can I be authentic (not Rousseau's language of course) and yet be connected to others in the social world. I will suggest that we all have an aspect of personal identity as my self and an aspect of identity as I am with others. But this is now a new problem because the radical individualism of the modern era has shown us its limitations, e.g., in the losses of communal involvement, commitment, responsibility etc.
I agree with you that identity is fluid in precisely the way you say under certain conditions: I choose the narratives I tell about myself in the current context of other lives that do not know my personal history. But of course, you can't say this in a small town if you have lived there all your life. Everyone knows your story and if you tell one that differs you would lose ground with the group. So again, identity in mobile, urban settings is different from identity in contexts where the personal is public.

Something that I want to come back to is an idea that has been intimated at least two times. That is, the deleterious effects of shaping the music talent of a young person that in some sense imprisons that young person in the talented identity. I don't fully understand this concern and I think somehow it drives the issue of talent and training that we are discussing. Can someone elaborate?

I really like the comment that the social plus personal experience of musicians powerfully differentiates musicians from other artists and makes musical endeavors moral and political as well as aesthetic. Is it also in the politics of music that the dangers to individual identity present themselves?

Lee Bartel: Making a clear summation of the discussion to this point is a serious challenge. I will try to collect various comments to shape the sum of definition and description and then phrase observations, opinions, or questions that may launch us into another flurry of discussion.

Identity:

Identity is what names me and what I name myself. It is who I am. It is something both given and developed (jb). Identity has a public and private dimension. It consists of what I look like, my predictable or accustomed behaviour, and what I know. Part of what I know, and not separate from it, is what I can do (kp). Identity as "who I am" is always multiple, always in a state of flux, and always relative to a host of things, tendencies, and attributes I am not. Put differently, identity functions reflexively or dialectically with alterity. Some aspects of my identity are pretty much given, but many involve constructs over which I have considerable power and influence (wb). Identity is who I am but who I am is always in a state of flux and always relative to a host of things, tendencies, and attributes I am not (wb).

Part of our multi-dimensional general identity is musical identity. Musical identity is always social identity.

Lee Bartel: There seems to me to be considerable "objectivity" in the concept of identity as here defined. I recognize the pointers to "constructs over which I have power" but I am wondering whether identity should not be seen more clearly as a self-perception, a self-
construction that is often unconsciously created through constructive reaction to feedback from external sources - the parent, teacher, peer, adjudicator. Also, there is brief mention of the identity consisting of what I am not as well as what I am. I wonder whether "what I am not" is at least as important as "what I am" or in some ways more powerful. When teacher, parent, or peer causes a child to conclude "I am not musical," "I am tone-deaf," "I can't sing" which is in fact untrue, do we not rob the child, deform the identity, and perpetrate systemic abuse? Is the reason people do not feel "robbed" of musical ability in cases like this because society sees music as a "talent" possessed by only a few and therefore believe they are in fact part of the majority in society and it is alright not to have musical ability? (self-efficacy as part of identity and the role of significant others - e.g., Bandura).

Is self-worth part of identity or does one's appraisal of one's identity lead to a self-worth judgement? If self-perception of talent contributes to identity and identity to self-worth, the feedback from significant individuals is not only crucial but also an ethical matter.

_Talent:_

_Talent is the ability to do something at high level without increased effort (kp). Talent is a multi-dimensional part of a multidimensional identity (wb). Talent is situated in practice, tradition, i.e., in ways of being musical. Talent is a dimension of identity that gets inculcated and nurtured by music education (wb)._ 

_Lee Bartel: _ How tenuous or stable is the musical identity? Since judgement or criticism seems always to be a first response to any musical activity, do self-judgements or others' judgements, whether perceived or real, constantly challenge (re-evaluate) the stability of one's identity as "musician."

If one is "named" talented or perceives oneself to be talented, and if talent is dependent on demonstrations of that talent in achievement or performance, does one's identity and therefore one's self-worth become tied to achievement (and in the case of music on-going performance) and not to "personhood?"

_Ethical Implications in Forming a Child's Identity as "Talented"_

_Important quotes:_

_Music and musicians are not held in particularly high esteem in our society (hence, a decision to assume a 'musician' identity should not be taken lightly or without consideration of a full range of consequences, many of them potentially adverse). Maybe one of the things that distinguishes musical education from indoctrination is freedom of choice informed by awareness the potential consequences of such choices. (wb)_

_Music involves the ritual enactment of many different identities, the exploration of various, diverse, and contradictory modes of subjectivity. That being the case, I'm unable to draw a
distinction between "music" and the people who make it. And the significance of that is that it makes music a fundamentally moral enterprise or undertaking. (wb)

An adjudicator's cutting remark can destroy a kid if it is presumed to have absolute validity. (wb)

I've long argued that we are wrong to regard musical education as an unconditional good (as much of our advocacy tends to imply). If one imputes to music power for positive ends, it seems to me that one has, in the same moment, granted it power for negative ends -- made of it a moral, and not just an innocuous, "aesthetic" undertaking. (wb)

So if parents are pressing a child to excel and the identity cost to the child in the peer social world is too high the child suffers or rebels. (jb)

Can everyone be good at something? Is being good at something an important part of everyone's identity. If the answer to the second question is yes, then the teacher's attempt to help a student to be good musically contributes to the enhancement of that child's identity. (jb)

That "music builds character" is a claim with ancient lineage. I suppose what might concern us here is whether this is invariably the case. Can music be destructive of "character"? Under what circumstances? I think I'm just anxious to remind people that most of our inspiring claims for musical experience are contingent. You're right, of course, to remind of the potentially positive side of the struggle to push talent to its limits. In fact, the polysemy of music makes it particularly well-suited to this. (wb)

"music is the kind of endeavor one never fully masters; musicianship is always a work in progress, and its tasks and rewards are always changing. This leads, at least potentially, to an awareness/acceptance/appreciation of respect for the true complexity/richness of reality -- in contrast, I suppose, to the reductive nature of language and reason." (wb)

Maybe one of the things that distinguishes musical education from indoctrination is freedom of choice informed by awareness the potential consequences of such choices. And perhaps music educators need to acknowledge things like (1) apparent or even conspicuous musical 'talent' do not necessarily mean one should invest heavily in music; (2) the possession of talent is but one reason one might wish to invest in musical activity; and (3) the decision of which among the multiple talents possessed by most people should be cultivated must be based on more than the mere existence of talent.

Lee Bartel: Except for this last comment by Wayne, discussion seems to be assuming that if there is talent then there should be development along the ladder to professional level - to expertise and excellence rather than to mere competence (able participant). Is the fundamental educational objective in music for excellence or competence, for amateur dabbling of professional perfection? Do we take all children in music class, set them on a
It seems to me that musical ability or talent, if determined in a context of classical music education, condemn one to ascending a ladder of ability which leads to nearly insurmountable challenge and expectation of unattainable perfection stemming both from the difficulty of musical literature as well as the limits of human cognition and kinaesthetics, thereby forcing everyone to stare into the face of one's own inability; some take on the life-time challenge of beating that inability. For some the "struggle with angels" is rewarding in itself. Others face the unavoidable conclusion that they are not up to the challenge and are thereby a failure. If that realization comes in public it is devastating and the fear of it coming in public is anxiety producing of the most severe sort. If one reaches a level where the inevitable imperfections are barely detectable by the public, one has reached a "safe" level but one must spend a life-time of effort surrounded by considerable stress staying there. Musical achievement is a never finished task. Only upon retirement can a musician leave the identity resting securely on past achievement, or perhaps in the security of the recording studio (al la Glen Gould) where perfection is not achieved through the vanquishing of the greatest challenge, or drug assisted perfection, but through the perfection attainable through undetected multiple efforts and digital magic.

In physical education in schools, all students are educated toward "recreation" rather than "sport" (where recreation means physical activity that all can participate in at a rewarding level and continue to participate in for the rest of their lives while sport is basically done extracurricularly with those who play competitively and on an ascending skill ladder leading for a few lucky ones to a professional career. Sport leads many children to feel inadequate. Recreation empowers all to participate).

In music, should we establish a "recreation" model of music making and educate toward that?

Consider musical (1) talent education that leads to guiltless competent participation in music as recreation. Or (2) musical education that favours the talented, sets them on a path that rewards only the best few with a career that produces a lifetime of stress. Those who are not in the select few who "make it," at best fall off the ladder into low-paying musical careers with varying levels of self-worth. For those not even selected in the "talented" group, the identity is stamped with "non-musician" and often (just ask the people around you or listen for awhile) with a lexicon of self-deprecating and denigrating excuses and labels that keep them from any kind of music making at all.

What are the ethical dimensions and implications of shaping a child's identity as "musically talented"?

Wayne Bowman: I agree that 'identity' tends to take on objective tones if we're not careful. I think that concern was part of what I was getting at in arguing that identity is something one builds and rebuilds; that it is always multiple; that it is fluid; and that it is
constructed in dialectical relation to alterity. Your turn to self-perception is useful, I think. Of course, self-perceptions relating to music don't pertain just to ability or capacity though: we don't just form self-perceptions (identities, self-descriptions) of the "I cannot sing" variety; there's also the "I am not the kind of person who engages in such activities or derives pleasure from them" variety. Another interesting notion: maybe there's something in the sex/gender distinction that might help us unpack or illuminate this talent/identity issue?

I'm not sure "systemic" is the right word, but to teach a child with musical ability (and if John Blacking's Venda are to be believed, everyone has such ability in some degree) that she is deficient or defective does indeed amount to a kind of abuse. Funny (queer, not humorous) how we have objectified music to such a degree that the act of educating people in it is seen as a largely technical undertaking whose outcomes are taken for granted and in any case justify what we do to people during the process of 'educating' them. Education is a fundamentally and profoundly moral/ethical undertaking, and I think that's part of what we seem to be getting at here. Somehow the profession has come to assume and accept that the whole point of music education is to develop talent and transmit knowledge: a deeply (fatally?) flawed vision.

To your point about a 'recreational' model for music education: Yes, AMATEUR in the original sense of the term -- one who does something for the love of it. One of the things we might do well to remember is what is sometimes sacrificed in becoming a professional musician.

To Talent: isn't this one of those things that, if everyone has it, ceases to exist? If everyone is talented is it any longer a presumed virtue to have it? One of the things music instruction in schools seems to do is give some kids who don't seem to excel anywhere else a place where they can, a thing they can be 'good at'. If we suppress the distinction that comes of excelling in music (the designation and subsequent self-perception of 'talent') are we then depriving those whom that designation fits well of one of the things musical experience seems to be 'good for'?

We should be careful to distinguish between talent and musical ability, since presumably everyone has the latter, while the former is something in relatively short supply by definition. To 'rob' someone (your phrase) of 'talent' isn't necessarily to rob her/him of 'musical ability' -- and perhaps that's one of the important things both teachers and students need to ponder?

Probably it's worth noting that the abuse/trauma to which you point in the public schools is a daily occurrence in the university school of music. Look what happens to those whose 'musician' identities are so finely honed in university when they come up against THEIR inevitable musical shortcomings (not tone-deafness, perhaps, but things just as devastating and perhaps more so since by that stage of advanced study there's a lot more on the line! Nobody in a music school is cavalier about their musicianship, but a central part of the university music curriculum is separating the 'haves' from the 'have nots' in this regard! Juries and recitals are life-changing events in most students' lives, in marked
contrast to music theory or music education classes). Your description of setting students on a course where their musician identity & self-worth is constantly tested & challenged is right on track. Maybe that's a factor, an influence, in what goes on in the schools? I mean, music teachers are often 'talents' who have fallen off the ladder (as you call it) and who now get their kicks vicariously -- through their students. The more talent that comes from their programs, the better their music educator talent is deemed to be. But the whole idea of talent is thoroughly incorporated and unquestioned, so that it becomes part of what drives things over and over again. [I concede that this is all grievously overstated -- a rhetorical ploy!!]. All this kind of mitigates against education in its broad sense, I think, such that what goes on is something more technical, more mechanistic, more 'training-like'. Excelling in music, professionally, is perceived to be a self-evident 'good.' That said, though, I really don't think that choosing between recreational and professional models (as if mutually exclusive?) will get us too far. But what if teachers were to take as part of their perceived obligation to help their students recognize that, unfortunately, music and musicians aren't very highly valued; that professional aspirations are fraught with problems; that amateur making is richly rewarding in a host of ways; that it's possible to be musical in many ways, many of them requiring only ability and desire rather than exceptional talent? (What might such a program look like? How would prospective teachers have to be educated themselves in order to effect such a significant reorientation in perceptions of the nature and purpose of musical education? How can we break the grip of this 'train-the-best-and-entertain-the-rest' mentality?)

Sorry for that barrage of loosely connected stuff in the preceding paragraph: I'm going to try to get this down hurriedly and not worry much about how it reads.

A minor (?) point on 'talent' -- I don't think it's quite fair to say that it's an ability to perform at high levels without increased effort. Most truly talented people I know work very hard to achieve what they do. Perhaps worth noting, too, that talent is concerned with exceptional executive ability of a certain kind -- that it's not just doing 'something' but doing certain kinds of things. For instance, we don't say that so-and-so is a very talented listener, do we? It's executive/productive/artistic (and indeed, it is common in the so-called 'aesthetic education' literature to see performance belittled because it is supposed to be inherently elitist).

Lee Bartel: Maybe my last thought provoker was over the edge? Too drastic or exaggerated? How about reacting to the following quotes from the movie, Hilary and Jackie. I hope you have seen the movie. Our original intent was to focus on "The ethics of early talent and identity formation." Within the definitions we have at this point what are your views on the ethical issues?

What is your reaction to these words?

Quotes from the Movie: Hilary and Jackie
The girls' mother after Jackie makes a mistake with the orchestra that Hilary was invited to play in and their mother conducted: "I'm never going to go through anything like that again. If you want to be with Hilary you will have to play as well as Hilary. If you want to be together you've got to be as good as each other."

Jackie in Moscow: "It's just the cello, and it's silly really. I just don't want to be a cellist after all. Well, I never asked to be a cellist, you see. It's all just a big cock-up. One day I was just playing and then the next day I was all booked for the next two years. I hate the cello if you want to know."

Hilary to Jackie: "If you think that being an ordinary person is any easier than being and extra-ordinary one you're wrong. If you didn't have that cello to prop you up you'd be nothing."

Jackie: Danny, would you still love me if I couldn't play?
Daniel: What?
Jackie: I said, would you still love me if I couldn't play?
Daniel: You wouldn't be you if you couldn't play.
Jackie: No, I want to know..
Daniel: Our bodies sway to music
Oh, brightening glance
How can we know
The dancer from the dance?
Jackie: But don't you wish sometimes you couldn't play, that you could just be ordinary?
Daniel: What? Live in the country, making bread, feeding chickens, playing once a year with a bunch of amateurs?
Jackie: How dare you insult my sister!
Daniel: I wasn't insulting her, I was .. .
Jackie: Well at least she chose her life. Not like you and me, we're just trained freaks!

Wayne Bowman: No, Lee, your last item was not really over the edge -- at least in my view. I think one can agree with all of what you were saying about the perils of talent or whatever we want to call it without suggesting it's invariably bad, or that we should ditch that and teach for amateur engagement, recreational music. People should have the opportunity to see how far their gifts can be developed. Trouble is, with a thing like music at least, one of the plain truths we face is that it has to be undertaken early -- well before school age even, and the fact the musical aptitude window begins to close at what is still a pretty tender age -- and refined for years, while the child is not yet old enough to be able to make a reasoned choice. The other day I came across a note written by my son (now a solo performer) when he was 9. In it he is describing himself, his likes, his dislikes, who he is. Midway through, he declares that he is "kind of beginning to like to play violin." At that point he had been playing for more than 5 years, and had continued to play because we persisted, not because he especially enjoyed it (although it helped a lot that his older sisters both played). We went to all kinds of pains to keep playing and practicing fun, partly because as musicians we believe it's a real character developer, and
partly because it was evident he had something special to say. But that something special
didn't really start to flower until about a year after he wrote the note I just referred to.
And even then it was not all smooth sailing. But at one point, he approached his mother,
frustrated, and said he wanted to quit violin. She said, "OK, if that's what you want. We'll
just sell the violin and that's that." He didn't think for long until he changed his mind, and
in so doing started really playing in earnest. I guess one of the things I'm pointing to is
the ethical dilemma attending the decision to have kids play an instrument at an age when
they really have little choice, and deciding when to leave it to their discretion as to when
and if to quit. Two of our three went on to professional careers, but the third quit violin
and went on pursue dance, which was her passion and an area in which she excelled.

Back to the earlier point. There should indeed be more emphasis upon recreational music-
making in music education. But we tend to build programs around instruments for which
there aren't a lot of options outside of school -- a real mistake, I suspect. And we teach
music as if it were a self-evident 'good', with little attention to what it's actually good for.
That said, I'm a little uneasy about renouncing the talent push altogether. What's more
important than deciding whether we will go one way or the other is, I suspect, to
recognize and confront the potential consequences (both beneficial and adverse) of going
either way. Put another way, we need to problematize what we do and why we do it,
rather than just doing it because that's what "music educators" do. We need to recover the
ethical ground in our musical instructional endeavors -- the ethical space in-between, as
Geraldine Finn calls it, from which we attend to the particularity of the individual thing
or student (his/her identity?), rather than assuming that what is because we are doing
what music educators do and music education is self-evidently good, what we are doing
is good for all. The perfect performance push (Charles Keil's phrase) is indeed destructive
for many, though at the same time it results for many others in exquisite moments that
stay with kids a lifetime and come to constitute the standard of what constitutes human
excellence, what makes lives worth living. So it's not a straight ahead thing, and that's
what's important we realize I think.

A couple comments on Ken's remarks (from awhile back) about the cache of
demonstrable skills vis-a-vis intellectual ones. Interesting point, actually. Sounds to me
like that means that something like talent is more deeply attached to who people are than
what they are seen to know. I suspect there's some real truth in that. Seemingly, then, it's
all the more serious when one is deemed to be deficient or lacking in talent! And yet
when people DO "have it," it's often undervalued because it's seen as a trait rather than an
achievement, accomplishment, a construction. That stays with it even as people advance,
doesn't it? Doesn't the parade of star soloists at the symphony concert series betray
something of that orientation, wherein audience apply the have/have-not judgment to
successful performers? (I don't want to push this last point too hard, but it's interesting to
speculate about.)

Wayne Bowman: I admit to having gone out of my way to protect my children from bad
music teachers -- which in this context we could probably define as teachers whose
musical skills were lacking, but more importantly who weren't tuned in to the huge
influence on kids identity they have, for better or worse. The fact two of our children still
play violin and love it has a lot to do, I think, with their having had a teacher who taught them not just about the violin, but about life. He was a true friend and mentor to them; he knew when to push and when to coast; and his interest in them was first as people and second as violinists -- or such is my assessment. One's reminded of the John Truslow Adams saying: There are two kinds of education. One should teach us how to make a living and the other to live well.

Lee Bartel: One of the things that worries me a bit about the "talent" research and the books on the "great stars" is that their view represents the "winners" -- the ones who were coordinated and motivated and focussed and perceptive and cognitive and lucky... enough to gain mainly the sunny side of teachers. It is the ones who did not make it to the Benjamin Bloom circle of international competition winners that caught the disparaging sighs and the tear-drawing put-downs -- we tend not to hear their stories except over a cocktail after they have become music publishers or copyright lawyers or ministers of education. But I think essentially my biggest concern is over the majority of people who decide they are unmusical, the general classroom teachers by the score who feel totally afraid of teaching music, and the many average musicians who are afraid to sit down at the piano and just play unrehearsed when any other musician might be around. That is where the "undetected" and unidentified damage has occurred. There are contexts when people participate and make music and contexts where they do not dare - if only we could extend the ones where they dare and foster that in schools as well. I am interested to see your comparison of the "atmosphere" and risk/fear level in the jazz world vs classical music.

Wayne Bowman: Well, jazz is more inherently playful, I’d say: more provisional. It’s also got a more egalitarian ethic: less hierarchical, more dialogue-oriented. I think because improvisation is always here-and-now, in the moment, and “mistakes” are simply a part of the music, there’s perhaps a bit of a buffer from the ‘fear’ thing you refer to. To improvise is always to put oneself at risk, to work ‘without a net.’ And learning to convert stumbles and mistakes into resources for new ideas is kind of a liberating thing: learning that surprising notes needn’t be wrong ones. Jazz is a lot about being resourceful and quick on one’s feet. So in a sense, a greater openness to risk -- a greater acceptance of what other musical practices would regard as flaws and blemishes -- goes with the turf in jazz. And at the same time, individualism isn’t just tolerated, it’s valued and expected: so there’s a greater range of latitude in certain respects. I’d like to think, then, that the kind of debilitating situation you’re describing is less a concern in jazz. And yet, the record industry does give us solos and soloists that dazzle us with their seeming perfection: and it can be hard to get neophytes to take the chance because the perceived distance between what they’re initially capable of and what they’re trying to emulate is so immense. Kids tend to sort themselves into players and non-players pretty quickly, even in jazz – a situation that’s not helped much by festivals where educators often feel the need to front their strongest soloists.

Joyce Bellous: I was engaged with the idea a while ago that the problem with talent and identity in the musical arena has to do with the totality of the teacher's involvement over the learner--body, mind and spirit. To be musical, and to develop the gift, the child's body
is taken over by someone else who knows how the body should stand, look, posture itself, move, when and where. The influence of the musical teacher over the musical student is far more intrusive than the math teacher over the math student. I think sports is another example like the musical one but it seems easier to see how sports connects with ordinary daily life, than playing the violin does, for example. It is primarily in instrumental music and dance that teachers intrude themselves into the shaping of the body of the child. It didn't used to be that way. The English teacher, and every other teacher, had something to say about how the learner sat, held a pencil, looked toward the front and conveyed attentiveness. I think it is fair to suggest that only music remains in the domain of body management, in this sense, and to the extreme that it does. Surely this must seem radically intrusive in the light of its singularity. But in addition to the body, the teacher educates the child in how to express feeling through music. So there is emotional territory that the teacher invades. And spiritually the teacher invests himself or herself in the student's life in such a way that the learner comes to see the teacher's way of life as a model for his or her own. So the child has no place to hide. Every aspect of a human life is bent towards producing music that comes from body, soul and mind. I don't really think that the excellence notion is as central as others see it. Surely if the child is talented then the investment in developing that talent and the satisfaction from doing so, will come from the child. Doing something you were born to do well, is inherently satisfying in terms of expressing identity. So I think it is this other difference I mention above that makes all the difference in music—maybe because we start so young with music (as opposed to sports). The management of body soul and spirit to make music begins before the child can appreciate or feel the satisfaction of doing well what one was born to do. And it is a necessary condition for finding out whether one is talented at all. It is a big gamble. The question is, is it worth the risk? The level of performance that expresses excellence these days, in all activities, sports and music included, is extremely high. What else can one do with one's body soul and mind that unites these three the way music does if one fails to pursue music to the point of excellence? Where else does one find the satisfaction? It sounds as though it can be found in dance, as you suggest happened to your daughter. So is our problem rather what do we do with those who drop out of the identity forming pattern of playing music if they do not continue with it? What else is there to drape one's life around that so holistically demands a person's attention?

Joyce Bellous: I was addressing the issue of the way the body soul and mind of the child is shaped by the musical teacher and the practice of making music, and you want us to focus on ethics. In one of the original emails Lee, you quoted Systematic Violence by Epp and Watkinson, to say that any practices that adversely impact individuals by "burdening them psychologically, mentally, culturally, spiritually, economically or physically" are violent practices. I am not familiar with this particular book so I am assuming that violence is both a bad thing to do to someone, on their view, and also is avoidable in good educational practices. Then we moved to the talent and identity debate as it functions within the music or arts education of children. From what you said at the outset, we want to see if there is a relationship between musical practices and violence, in the sense used here. According to this book, if a musical teacher learner relation is good educationally, then it does not burden the learner in any of these ways.
First of all, I question that burdening someone is inherently and inevitably violent. And further, if it is violent, i.e., being burdened hinders us in a way that is miseducative, I question whether being violent in this sense is avoidable.

So how do we understand the ethics of teaching and learning? Ethics is about freedom, at least according to Kant. He divided ethics between what can be externally constrained by law and what must be internally constrained, i.e., self-constrained. So the educational game is how to teach someone in a way that does them no violence by burdening them unfairly and enables their freedom to flourish within the bounds of reason and in the context of other people's freedom. So really ethics is about the appropriate use of power. What Kant missed when he divided ethics between actions that can be externally constrained and actions that are self-constrained is that external constraint tends to become internal constraint. They are hard to keep separate. That is why Michel Foucault criticized Kant. But Foucault also says that power itself is not evil. It was Sartre who believed that power itself is evil. Foucault disagrees and says he doesn't see the evil in the practice of someone who, knowing more than another, tells him what he must do, teaches him, transmits knowledge to him, communicates skills to him. The problem is rather, how to avoid the wrong use of power when you are teaching someone. How do we avoid abuse, in order words? How do we keep from making a child subject to the arbitrary and useless authority of a teacher? So I am not sure we have to avoid burdening someone in order to be ethical, but rather, we must avoid making someone dependent on us merely for the sake of being dependent on us. I think this is quite hard at some points in an educational relationship because a child who doesn't know how to make music is dependent on someone to show her how.

So perhaps I would say that I may burden the body soul and spirit of a child legitimately and educatively if the child's freedom to make music is enhanced in a way that brings satisfaction to the child eventually or for the most part, and also if the child's freedom to make another life choice continues to be a possibility, if making music does not satisfy the child or provide any personal happiness.

Ken Peglar: After a long silence, here are some random responses. Some thoughts on the various forms of ethics as a process. The first looks at the agent; the second at the process and the third, at the outcome. Each is problematic for a number of reasons, although I've mentioned just a few.

1. virtue or character ethics - the intrinsic goodness of the person initiating the process determines the goodness of the outcome. This is Aristotle. The teacher who is ethical, who will have the best interests of the student always in mind, will ensure that the process and outcome of talent development will be ethical. This also suggests that the child/student has some direct input in the process of their talent development, that the student willingly responds to the teacher's efforts. Of course, the student may choose not respond and opt out of the process entirely. And "good" does not necessarily mean "kind," although it probably does given Ari's dictum of "moderation in all things."
2. the Kantian or deontological position - that the music student is treated as an end-in- 
herself, a morally inviolable entity. Kant is trying to make being an ethical teacher easy 
for us by telling us that it is our duty to be ethical. Whenever we do something, we do it 
as if every other rational entity would do the same thing the same way under the same 
circumstances. If all music students are treated as "ends" and not "means," then their 
instruction will be ethical. But again we are confronted with a two-party process. If the 
student doesn't wish to be a participant in this process, his/her talent is not served by it. 
The idealism of each of the above notwithstanding, getting the kid over the rough spots is 
the ethical gray area. What to do when the kid wants to opt out of the process?

It seems to me that the third position is the most contentious.

3. the teleological or utilitarian position - the child is the object of instruction and 
whatever means is used to achieve the goal of developing their talent is justified on the 
grounds that he/she will have a chance at greatness. The most extreme expression of this 
position is Machiavelli's "the end justifies the means." How many times has a parent or 
teacher said: "Someday she'll thank me for this." In my experience, goal-oriented 
teaching is the norm.

A couple of years ago, I had a colleague whose child was talented. I've avoided saying 
very or extremely talented. She was a gymnast who had earned a provincial card at the 
age of 14. She had placed 4th or 5th in a national championship. The gymnast's mother 
seemed to be in a constant state of disbelief that her daughter could be doing these 
wonderful things. "I don't know where she gets it," she would say. "Her father and I have 
two left feet." Her kid had her unconditional support, but for all practical purposes, she 
had placed this child's life in the hands of a coach who had "an international reputation." 
She acknowledged that he was "hard on the girls" but he got results. She said it was 
character-building. I'm reminded of the picture from a recent Olympics when Kerri 
Strug's coach held her up after she won a medal, injured. Her foot was bandaged and her 
face was tight with pain. She didn't look like a volunteer. Is there an ethics of sacrifice in 
this? And what part of the sacrifice if any is coerced? What does the child give up? This 
goes back to my gymnast colleague. Her daughter didn't have a life outside of the sport: 
training, school, competition, that was it. What do the parents give up? A kid who is in 
the talent/training mill must be aware of the financial burden and the time constraints on 
their parents. This may contribute to psychological pressures on the kid to succeed. 
What's the cost of a decent violin? Perhaps the central issue here is whether or not the 
child is a volunteer.

The British evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins, has said that religious instruction of 
the young is a form of child abuse. By that he means that because children are taken to 
church at a young, impressionable age, they are not volunteers. Their freedom of choice 
has been taken away and, because of their youth and lack of experience, the implications 
of that instruction is not known to them. This may seem extreme but perhaps there's a 
parallel with the instruction of the talented. In the sense of "someday she'll thank 
us for this."
Backtracking a bit. Perhaps the notion of talent is conferred by the recognition of some authority. At the very least, talent seems to be contextual. A talented high school student may be a standout at home but when he gets to Juilliard, he's ordinary. I saw the movie Hilary And Jackie. I think "freaks" is too strong a word. It's an over-reaction although I'll never know what it feels like from the inside. But the telling line in the script is Jackie's reference to Hilary: "Well, at least she chose her life."

Lee Bartel: We have now raised some of the issues inherent in the education of children in an area that demands years of intense training to meet the increasing demands of excellence. We have not developed here a concise, coherent, or complete philosophical argument. We have only tried to begin a discussion and reflection on these matters. What pedagogy is justified in the pursuit of performative excellence? What should be the goal of music education in the schools? What values and policies should be in place in the school system? How do we educate ALL children and how do we educate the exceptionally motivated and apt?

This discussion is far from over. We welcome your ideas and response.